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PENDLE HILL MONDAY NIGHT FORUM 2002-2003

Racial Justice: Speak Truth to Power

“Racism and Justice in a Violent Tradition”

George E. “Tink” Tinker, October 7, 2002

I’m really pleased to be here. I’m an Osage, these days calling Oklahoma home. At least we’re surrounded by the State of Oklahoma. Pawhuska is the capitol of our nation. I’m what’s called a “mixed blood” in the American Indian community, and by that we mean that something like – I’m Osage Indian on my father’s side and an ordained Lutheran minister on my mother’s side.

We Osages were once a very powerful nation in the heartland of the United States, occupying a territory that consists of most of modern day Missouri and a little bit of Arkansas and Oklahoma, a piece of Kansas. Everything north of the Arkansas River, west of the Mississippi and south of the Missouri was ours until about 1803 when the United States purchased our land – from the French. We’re still trying to figure that out too. It all falls under the rubric of the law of discovery and some decisions that were made in Europe that didn’t have anything to do with Osages, but it did cost us our land. In an act of what I call unprecedented generosity, we finally ceded our lands to the United States Government so that they could open it up to Lutheran refugee resettlement. That’s the home of the Missouri Synod. We were moved seven times in forty-nine years, each time signing a new treaty, and each time the treaty read that the stipulations of the treaty would be good *in perpetuum*. That was the English language; the Indian language was something like as long as the grass grows and the water flows and the wind blows and the sun rises in the east. We figure that’s about seven years. That’s who we are, a thumb nail sketch.

As Paul said, I teach in a seminary that is largely a white Euro-American institution, along with my colleague Vincent Harding, who has Pendle Hill connections from two decades ago. We’ve been working to diversify the student body and the faculty with some success over the years. I teach at a liberal school. It has a 110 year history of white American liberalism which means that most of our students come with a vast array of justice commitments. They are concerned about nuclear disarmament or stopping war in outer space, or they are concerned about violence against women, or they are concerned about gay and lesbian issues. My job for eighteen years has been to get them to connect the dots because all those things are interconnected.

I want to talk this evening about America’s history of violence, a history that has been carefully concealed from most of us, concealed from our children in schools, whether they are in public schools or private church schools. I want to talk to you a little bit about Christopher Columbus and connect that dot with the globalization of capital. I can do that in forty minutes, right?

In her wonderful novel, some people would say “the” American Indian novel, Leslie Silko, in *Ceremony*, begins the book with a reflection on Spider Woman. In the opening page, in a little poem that Silko has written, it becomes apparent that Spider Woman is actually the author, not Silko, of this novel. Spider Woman, Grandmother, is busy weaving her web. And her web is the story that is to follow on the succeeding pages. Silko is Laguna from a pueblo just west of Albuquerque. And in their creation story Spider Woman is the creator – the creatrix – who indeed creates the world by thinking it into existence. It’s a wonderful metaphor about how people have made this world and continue to make it in the forces that work in us and through us.

The point I want to draw from her opening is that we are all living a story. The United States of America is a story more than anything else. We should remember that as a political entity, the United States is entirely an artificial artifact that has no natural existence in the world. It has been created and recreated out of the streams of different peoples from different European countries that have come over the big waters to inhabit this continent. And oh yes, increasingly we are aware that there were some non-Europeans who came over those great waters, some willingly, and some not so willingly.

But, what is this story that we are telling? It's become increasingly important to me since September of last year because the bombing, the devastation in New York and Washington, DC, not only shocked all of us, but it has captured the imagination of citizens in the United States the way perhaps nothing has since the Civil War. But I'm not sure it's been a good capturing of our imaginations. I am afraid that it is reinforcing or giving the powers that be in the center of power a way of reinforcing a story that denies our history the way an alcoholic denies his or her problem with alcohol, or any addict does. In fact, it turns that history inside out. And suddenly the United States again is that Christ figure who knows no sin, is completely righteous in the world, and is consistently wronged by forces from outside of our artificial borders. Borders, by the way, that virtually no American Indian nation in the United States, Canada or Mexico recognizes as valid.

What are the symbols of this story? What is the story that we're living? Whether we know there's a story or not we are living it. We are a part of the narrative. And who controls this story? That's probably the most important question because it is clear to me that I don't control that story. When I pick the newspaper up and read it, when I read the editorial page, very rarely are they saying things that capture my imagination or speak the way I would speak if I were the dictator, which nobody has offered to make me. But, who does control this story? Where does the power come from? Because words are incredibly powerful. And this story, even as this state called the United States is, as I said, artificial, the story is enormously powerful and is on the verge of conquering the world. Not the United States conquering the world. That would be a misperception. Yes, they say we're the number one superpower, the only superpower in the world. Don't believe it, because the empire that is being birthed as we sit here is not an American empire. It's not the United States empire. It's an empire predicated on the globalization of capitalism. And we are just pawns playing a small role, giving George W. Bush the kind of popularity ratings he needs in order to maintain his status in telling the story the way he and his people would like to tell it.

The symbols of this story are plentiful. They include Jesus, strangely enough. I mean, when you stop and think about it, right now as we stand on the verge of going to war again, having Jesus as a symbol is really strange. Yet, in this nation, the story we tell each other, whether you agree with it or not, is that this is a Christian nation. So I asked a group of Methodists a week ago, "How many Iraqis does Jesus want you to kill this time?" Other symbols are the Puritans and Pilgrims of New England, Washington, not so much that he was the first president, but the image that school kids have of Washington crossing the Delaware. Thomas Jefferson, who was the perpetrator again of the crime of property exchange against Osages, John Wayne, George Custer who in the popular mind is elevated to the rank of General, even though he died as a Lieutenant Colonel having pulled off the most stupid attack in American military history against a superior force – a surprise attack against a superior force, and he's remembered as a hero because he died in the process.

And then, of course, Cristobol Colón, the symbol par excellence of our unanimity as Americans, because Colón is the one who opened these continents up to civilization, as if the millions of people who inhabited these continents had no civilization. Oh, yes, they had a city, Tenochtitlán, which the Spaniards discovered was five times as big as any city in Europe, but lacked a civilization. But see, that's an important part of the story that we tell ourselves – that these Indians were savage pagans and had no civilization. If we don't believe that, we cannot justify taking their lands away from them. So it's an important part of the story, just as it's an important part of the story that Afghanistan must have a constitutional democracy in

order to function in the community of states with the United States. Just as, it's not enough for the Palestinians to elect their own leadership, but must bow to pressure, external pressure, not just from the State of Israel but also from the United States, and replace their duly elected leader with someone who is more malleable in the hands of the West. Those are parallel pieces of the story that we are told about every day in the press. The press never gets around to telling us that in fact the United States and Great Britain together colluded in the United Nations to give Jews a piece of property in the Middle East that belonged already to someone else. We're not told that; we are only told about how uncivilized, violent and savage the Palestinians are as they try to defend their own land. And why did we give those Jews a piece of land in Palestine? Well, God knows we didn't want them moving in here, right? So that anti-Semitism was already a part of the decision making in the late 1940's. See how complex it is? Anti-Semitism helps create the State of Israel, and the intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians then becomes our biggest headache and we are obligated now to support the Israelis whom we put in place. But it doesn't just start there.

I'm going to take my coat off and get down to business because there's a long history involved here. It goes back to tenth and eleventh century Europe. It goes back to the Crusades. It goes back to the mixing of Christianity with politics with Innocent III's claim that he was not only as Pope, head of the Church, but also wielded the secular sword of State and hence was the superior of every Christian monarch in Europe. When we go back and try and reconstruct a rationale for the Crusades, the rationales are all rationales of distracting people's attention from problems in Europe, and have nothing to do with bringing justice to the Middle East, which was by then already the homeland of a predominantly Muslim people. But we've got to remember there's more to it than just European war-making amongst themselves, as well as against Muslims in the Middle East. There were even Crusades in Europe, one European Christian nation against another European Christian nation. Read about the Teutonic Knights and their Crusade against the Lithuanians, who had made the mistake of converting to Christianity through the king and the bishops in Sweden instead of those in Germany. And it was considered a just war. And Jesus once again wanted somebody dead. You know, that's not the Gospel I read. So I am confused every time I see that kind of rationale, wondering what *indeed* would Jesus do. That's WIWJD!

But in the fourteenth century, into the fifteenth, Europe lost about a quarter of its population because of plague. A quarter of the people just disappeared because of this disease called Black Plague. From the seventh century until the fifteenth century Europeans were constantly threatened by Muslim pressure, especially on the Iberian Peninsula. It was only seven months before Cristóbal Colón sailed in 1492 that the Christian princes of the Iberian Peninsula, especially the monarchs of Castile and Aragón, repelled the so-called Moors from the Iberian Peninsula and reestablished Christian hegemony over what would become, in another generation or two, the modern state of Spain.

And we know that Europe at the time of Christopher Columbus suffered a longevity rate that was disastrously low. People could expect to live, generally, less than thirty years from birth to death. That's a civilized Europe. You see, the point is that Europeans had a history of death and dying, a history of having honed military technologies to a high level, having engaged in killing, having suffered death both by disease and by killing, that reduced their sensitivity to death and dying and enhanced their war making technology. So that when Columbus came to the Caribbean and brought the soldiers with him, about four million Indians died during the eight years of Columbus' reign as Viceroy, Admiral of the Caribbean.

There's a priest, a Dominican priest by the name of Bartólome de Las Casas, who actually catalogued some of the death and dying for us, and does it in a bold way. Others have tried to say, "You know, these were men of their times; they didn't know any better." Las Casas talks about Spanish soldiers taking a spear and taking great delight in running it through the belly of a pregnant woman and scoring points for getting both baby and mother with one thrust of the spear. And others who placed bets with one another to see who could come closest to hacking a child in half with one blow of the sword. Las Casas was there, an eyewitness, who was a part of the conquest of Cuba. In fact, it was the conquest of Cuba that led to Las

Casas' own conversion in the early 1500's. We know that morality was in place already in Europe at this time. The Ten Commandments, after all, had been published sometime before. You know, Thou Shalt Not Kill, Thou Shalt Not Steal. And the Dominicans, as early as 1517 on the Island of Hispaniola, decided to refuse communion to Spaniards who participated in the slaughter. Under great personal threat to themselves, they excommunicated those who were engaged in the violence. So that we can't excuse the Spanish armies on the basis of "they didn't know what they were doing."

By 1492, though, violence was already a way of life in Christian Europe. If you want to read about it, read David Stannard's book *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*. His first long chapter deals with life in Europe right at 1492. Another one is Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*. Again, he talks about Europe, not just what happens in the Columbian adventure, but what was going on in Europe at that time. Violence was a way of life. It had captured people's imagination. It was already a part of the story that people were telling themselves about who they are. And once you start telling the story, then it captures everyone in its web and you can't help but play some part in maintaining that story. It takes an act of incredible will to engage in resistance over against the dominant story once it's entrenched. That's really what I'm calling you all to do – to engage in counter-storytelling. But it's not going to be easy, and we've got to connect all our counter-stories one with the other.

One problem though is that all these figures in history who have perpetrated these crimes have been lionized by the dominant story in ways that we deny, ignore, forget their participation in that other side of history. So that we conveniently forget that Thomas Jefferson owned slaves until the day he died, even though he knew better and said he knew better. And Christopher Columbus was a murderer and a slave trader. It's that simple. And yet we've elevated him to the status of being a national hero through this thing called "Columbus Day," which is, in the final analysis, just a state supported act of hate speech.

People ask us when we resist the Columbus Day Parade in Denver – we had three or four thousand people on the street last year, not all Indians I'll tell you, a lot of good white folk, people from other ethnic groups, black groups, Chicano groups, Asian groups standing with us – because they understood there was more at stake than just Indian people, that the whole history of violence is being white-washed in the observance of this thing called Columbus Day. And yet, those who continue the parade, those who organize it and support it, keep saying, "Oh, he was a great, great Navigator." Well, a lucky Navigator anyway. What he finally discovered was that he was lost, about half a world lost, was pretty sure he was in Japan until the day he died. In Japan or close to it.

When we whitewash that history we forget that this was the same man who sailed with the Portuguese in slave trading expeditions along the coast of Africa. We forget that he took a half a dozen slaves back with him on the first voyage, and when he failed to find the gold that he covets on every other page of his journal, on the second voyage he loads up the holds of his ships with 1500 native people, arrested in their own land, and carted off to the slave markets in Seville to be sold for profit so that he can pay off his debts to their Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella, the Monarchs of Castile and Aragón. That's what we're celebrating.

But actually, there's more to it than that. Indian people are clear that Columbus Day is a celebration of American Indian genocide. Our detractors will say, "Columbus didn't kill all those Indians; he killed actually very few. It's people who came after him that killed them." Well, that's not true. Because we know from Diego Colón, Columbus' brother, from his own census taken on the Island of Hispaniola, that there was a tremendous death toll during Columbus' own life on the Island of Hispaniola. And we know from Las Casas that the original population of about eight million people on that island, within thirty years, was down to something like twenty-eight thousand. That's a loss of seven million, nine hundred and sixty-two thousand people in thirty years.

But you know what? Columbus is dead so it doesn't really matter. It's not Columbus that we're objecting to when we protest this parade. It's that Columbus has become a part of the story and has become a metaphor in this narrative that you and I live, and a metaphor for all that's good about America – ignoring all the violence. In other words, Columbus is being used to whitewash our history. It's a revisionist project, folks. The Indian voice here is not revisionism. The celebration of Columbus Day is revisionist history done by those who are addicted to the accumulation and exercise of power in the world, the exercise of power for the increase of monetary profit. And that's how we get from Columbus to the globalization of capital, or what I call sometimes "Bush-Clintonism." Because you see, Clinton was much more a part of this than either of the two Bushes. He was the No. 1 big business president of all time in all the world's history. Remember NAFTA? The Caribbean Basin initiative? Those were Clinton's projects. In fact they were resisted by some Republicans until they got into power. Then suddenly they're all right. So I call it Bush-Clintonism.

There are countless ways of retelling this story in its revisionist mode, countless ways of making sure that Americans feel comfortable occupying somebody else's house having taken it away from them. So that every year around the week of Columbus Day, pundits writing op-ed pieces on the editorial page of our Denver's newspapers, and probably other places around the country, remind Americans snidely and self-confidently that before white people came to the Americas and started killing Indians, Indians were busy killing Indians. Right? Is there anyone who hasn't been taught this somewhere along the line? It's one of those little white lies, folks. Told as a part of this narrative in order to excuse the violence of the Europeans who came to the Americas and the violence created by the centers of power in this project called the United States, and the globalization of capital. Told so that we can feel a little more at ease in looking down our noses at Indians and Blacks, Chicanos, Latinos and Asians, who are pressing for some measure of justice, whether it's repatriation of lands or artifacts, or whether it's financial recompense for hardship suffered, or whether it's simply a piece of the pie, something as simple as affirmative action.

The power center uses all that language from the Civil Rights structure. "Equality now" gets used as a key word by neo-conservatives, used against people of color in order to squeeze out programs like affirmative action, which by the way I was never much in favor of anyway. I think there were better ways to do that. In fact, affirmative action was just a liberal program to co-opt people of color and bring them closer to the center, so that they felt a little more empowered, so that their voices wouldn't disturb those at the center of power and could be co-opted by them. And it happened in my community and American Indian communities as much as anywhere else.

I want to go back to this business of the myth of Indian savagery and violence. I want to just give you one little example. Before there was significant contact with the Sioux, what became the Dakota territories, they already had a history, in spite of the fact that Hegel said these people have no history. Actually, he said it about Africa. Africa is a land with no history. Well you see that's a majoritarian device in order to obliterate somebody's past so that you can occupy and colonize them.

Now, we all know who the Sioux are, right? They are one of Hollywood's favorite targets for vilification. The meanest and baddest Indians in Hollywood are either the Apaches or the Sioux. Just ask John Wayne. He went up against them both, usually victorious. So these violent, savage, bloodthirsty Sioux – and even if all other Indians were peaceful we know the Sioux were not – produce this "winter count." They did it often enough. But this went on exhibit at the Buechel Museum in South Dakota in St. Francis, and it is particularly instructive because it recounts a seventy-six year history of the Brule Lakotas right before their first major contact with Europeans, from the late 1700's to the mid 1800's. Each year is remembered for one remarkable event that was indelibly impressed on their minds, so that the historian, by hooking all the other details to that one major event, could remember and recount the history of the people. In 76 years these bloodthirsty savages remembered one year for a war – one – and it was the year that they killed two of their enemy. Folks, I'm sorry, but when you remember at Gettysburg that the South lost 28,000 soldiers, and the North lost 21,000 soldiers, a war in which two people are killed ain't much. It ain't going to

win Hollywood's heart. They are going to have to make up a lie in order to sell movies and that's what they've done. And the American people have bought it hook, line and sinker because it helps validate European occupancy of North America.

We do the same thing today, and that's why this is important. If this was only about Indians it would be just interesting, and you could dismiss Tinker by saying, "He's just an angry man." I've got students who do that all the time. "He's just an angry man." Hey, I'm passionate about what I am talking about because it's really important. And it's much more important than just talking about Indians, because we do the same thing that we've done to Indians to Africans in terms of the mythology about Africa, the Dark Continent. Why is it the dark continent? They've got no light there? The sun doesn't shine? Or is it just they have dark skin and scare us so that we've got to make up other stories about how Blacks are lazy, how Mexicans are lazy, how Indians are lazy, especially the men. The women are okay because they are accessible to white men. But Mexican men are lazy, and Mexican women deserve better than Mexican men, so they are made accessible to white men in the mythology. Read Ron Takaki by the way if you haven't read Takaki's books yet. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* is a great, great book about exactly this kind of stuff. He discusses some of the images that I am briefly referencing.

And now, our press keeps telling us stories, and our political leaders keep telling us stories, about those nations to the south of us and the southern hemisphere and their inability to maintain healthy economies because they don't follow America's lead. So we've been telling nations in the south, who were really doing pretty well in the 80's, that in order to really thrive and develop – have you ever thought about why it's important to develop? Is there any nation in the world today that is free to choose not to develop? Where does that word "develop" come from? Well, folks, it's a part of the story too. Progress, development, temporality and the march of time are all part of the story that you and I act out each day.

But we've told nations in the south, most forcefully through Bill Clinton, that in order to develop, you poor folks have to move towards privatization and free market economies. As Clinton said the day before he left office, "Freedom is measured in terms of free markets." Whoa. Where did that piece of wisdom come from? Free markets means you've got to open your markets up to me. You ain't free until your markets are free and accessible by me. It's like making Mexican women accessible to white men. The sexism, classism, racism are all rolled in suddenly to one ball of wax, aren't they? They all play off of each other. Why privatization? Because many of those countries have nationalized resources and industries. That smacks of socialism to those in power in the north, and that's got to be cut off at the pass. We want you to privatize so that our corporations can buy your land and access cheaply your mineral wealth. So in the last five years, a couple hundred new goldmines, all owned by U.S. and other international interests, have been opened up in Peru alone. That's the connection. We tell the story; hence, we get to control your economy, your country, your land, your labor.

I'll close by saying, if we don't start telling a counter narrative, telling a different story, and telling it in every aspect of the narrative that we can think of, if we don't start dreaming a new dream about equality, peace, parity, globally, then we're headed down the road of doing not what Jesus did but acting like Roman Emperors instead of Jesus. And I'm speaking as a Lutheran minister who has minimal connection to the Lutheran Church anymore. I practice what my tribe does. I have moved back that way. But I still have this great, great respect for Jesus. He seems to me to be a very powerful model of something different in the world than anything we have experienced in the past five hundred, a thousand, fifteen hundred years.

Tell a different story because your telling of the story has power too, even though it's just one or two or six or fifty. We can tell a different story than the one that is taught us by that power center most usually represented these days in the press.

Dream a new dream.

